

A BRIEF OVERVIEW ON TRANSLATION THEORY

ABSTRACT

Translation has existed since human beings needed to communicate with people who did not speak the same language. In spite of this, the discipline which studies translation is relatively recent. The growth of translation studies as a separate discipline is a success story of the 1980s. Translation studies bring together a variety of fields, including linguistics, literary studies, history, anthropology, psychology and economics. Translation was given several definitions which were often at odds with each other: translation as an exact science; translation as a paradox. The following work originates from the reading of two books by L. Venuti: “The Translator’s Invisibility: A History of Translation” (1995) and “The Scandals of Translation: Towards an Ethics of Difference” (1998). According to Venuti (1998), translation has been marginalized in literary studies because it is supposed not to exist as a legitimate mode of textual transformation; this marginalizing is institutionalized in copyright law, which does little but obscure the activity of translators and encourage the current imbalance in translation flows. Starting from the reflections this stirred up, I chose some points and focused on them. Then I read other books in order to widen my view of the matter. The essay is divided into three sections: A matter of authorship section, the section about the translation as a decisional process, and the so – called «Translator’s shadow» section. The work which follows does not aim to provide solutions; it is simply a reflection on the role of the translator.

1. A MATTER OF AUTHORSHIP

Since authorship is generally defined as originality, translation is derivative, neither self-expressive nor unique: it simply imitates another text. Given the reigning concept of authorship, “translation provokes the fear of authenticity, distortion and contamination” [Salmon, 2003, p. 24]. Yet insofar as the translator must focus on

the linguistic and cultural constituents of the foreign text, translation can also provoke the fear that the foreign author is not original but derivative, fundamentally dependent on existing materials. So, instead of enabling a true and disinterested understanding of the foreign text, translation provokes fear, an abusive exploitation of originality. And insofar as the translator focuses on the linguistic and cultural constituents of the foreign text, translation provokes the fear that authorial intention cannot possibly control their meaning and social functioning. Because of these fears, translation has long been neglected in the study of literature, even in our current situation. Contemporary scholarship tends to assume that translation does not offer a true understanding of the foreign text or a valuable contribution to the knowledge of literature, domestic or foreign. The effects of this kind of assumption are evident in the promotion practices of academic institutions, as well as in academic publishing. Translation is rarely considered a form of literary scholarship and, compared to original compositions, translated texts are infrequently made the object of literary research. It tends to be ignored even by scholars who, among other things, often must rely on translated texts in their research and teaching. Translation is therefore degraded by the prevalent concept of authorship, especially in literature and in literary scholarship, and this concept underwrites its unfavourable definition in copyright law, not only in the codes of specific national jurisdictions, but also in the major international treaties. Closely related to the idea of authorship are the concepts of fidelity (or “faithfulness”), transparency, and the idea that the more faithful a translation is, the more genuine it will be. Fidelity and transparency are two qualities that, for centuries, have been regarded as ideals to be achieved in translation, particularly in literary translation. These two ideals are often at odds. Thus, in the 17th century, in France, the phrase “les belles infidels” was coined, to suggest that translations, like women, could be either faithful or beautiful, but not both at the same time.

Fidelity pertains to the extent to which a translation accurately renders the meaning of the source text, without adding to or subtracting from it, without intensifying or weakening any part of the meaning, and otherwise without distorting it.

Transparency pertains to the extent to which a translation appears to a native speaker of the target language to have originally been written in that language, and conforms to the language's grammatical, syntactic and idiomatic conventions. A translation that meets the first criterion is said to be a "faithful translation"; a translation that meets the second criterion, an "idiomatic translation." The two qualities are not necessarily mutually exclusive. The criteria used to judge the faithfulness of a translation vary according to the subject, the precision of the original contents, the type, function and use of the text, its literary qualities, its social or historical context, and so on. The criterion for judging the transparency of a translation can be found more clearly: an unidiomatic translation "sounds wrong". Nevertheless, in certain contexts, a translator may consciously strive to produce a literal translation. Literary translators and translators of religious or historic texts often adhere as closely as possible to the source text. In doing so, they often deliberately stretch the boundaries of the target language to produce an unidiomatic text. Similarly, a literary translator may wish to adopt words or expressions from the source language in order to provide "local colour" in the translation. This matter has always interested reflections on translation practice, since Cicero and Horace who, in their works "De Optimo Genere Oratorum" (52 BC) and "Ars poetica"(18 BC), respectively profess not to render a translation "verbum pro verbo" (word for word) and state that in a translation, the most important thing is to preserve the sense of the original version. But, what does a translator have to be faithful to? Does he have to be faithful from a linguistic point of view? Does he have to be faithful to the style employed in the original text, or to the sense of the author? Often being faithful to a specific aspect of the text leads the translator not to be unfaithful to another aspect of the same text; making a choice is the task of the translator.

2. TRANSLATION AS A DECISIONAL PROCESS

The translator therefore has to make some choices. He draws up a project plan which foresees a relationship between the original text and its translation. He adopts a

strategy and the one adopted at the beginning of the process influences the following strategies employed. The translation project is a matter of “problem solving”. Translators decide how to translate. They have to choose among a wide range of options and exclude all those which do not suit the aims of the translation that are established at the beginning of the process. If the project is well planned, the result will be coherent. So, it would be useful to see translation as a decisional process, according to Levy who wrote that translation involves a succession of choices, according to a determined hierarchy set by the translator, for whom order implies specific results.

3. THE «TRANSLATOR’S SHADOW»

As mentioned in the introduction, Venuti uses the term “invisibility” to describe the translator’s situation and activity in contemporary society. A translated text is judged acceptable when it reads fluently, when the absence of any linguistic or stylistic peculiarities makes it seem transparent, giving the appearance that it reflects the foreign writer’s personality or intention, or the essential meaning of the foreign text; the appearance, in other words, that the translation is not in fact a translation, but the “original”. The illusion of transparency is an effect of fluent discourse, of the translator’s effort to insure easy readability by adhering to current usage, maintaining continuous syntax, fixing a precise meaning. This illusory effect conceals the numerous conditions under which the translation is made, starting with the translator’s crucial intervention in the foreign text. The more fluent the translation is, the more invisible the translator will be. According to hermeneutics, translation takes into account interpretation, and interpretation is a practice which varies if the interpreter changes. It is not an automatic practice, and it is always influenced by the translator’s work. Translation is an unthinkable practice if it does not take into account the target culture, the society or the historical moment in which the translator is living. In a text to be translated, the translator always finds elements which evoke something in the translator’s mind. A translator has a memory. He has his own story, his own experience and in a given way these elements influence his

work. The thought that a translator does not interfere with the translated text is mere illusion. Since translation is a rewriting of the original text, it, whatever its intention, reflects a certain ideology. Always there is the translator's shadow. There is no specific criterion which permits the adoption of a source or a target oriented translation method as the best way of translating. It depends on the context, which is a crucial element to be taken into account.

The translator adopts decision strategies. They are based on his own experiences. Indeed, translation solutions differ among translations because they are influenced in a remarkable way by a hierarchy set up by the translator and his interpretation of the text. As the first interpreter of the text to be translated, he establishes the relationship in his language among the employed elements' sense, interpretation and frequency. For all these reasons the translator orients the translation towards himself. The opposition between source-oriented and target-oriented collapses and perhaps it would be more opportune to use the term self-oriented translation, oriented towards the "rewriter" who sometime yields to external influences which are always filtered by the translator's mind. Thus, I would rather talk about "translator visibility" or, better, about the "translator's shadow". A dispassionate translator will create a dispassionate translation, and a dispassionate translation simply does not work.

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